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SUBJECT: Taiwan Elections: South China Scholar Calls Both Candidates Better Than Status Quo

Ref: 07 Guangzhou 1265

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Though Ma Ying-jeou is heavily favored by south China experts to win in the upcoming Taiwan elections, a victory by either of the leading candidates, in their view, would improve cross-Straits relations. In spite of efforts by Taiwan Businessmen Associations to encourage their members to return to vote in Taiwan, numbers are likely to be moderate. One scholar thought the recent developments in Tibet could be advantageous to Frank Hsieh and the DPP. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Regardless of who wins the upcoming Taiwan elections, cross-Straits relations will improve, according to Xiamen University Taiwan Research Institute Political Research Director Zhang Wensheng. While the Institute's scholars generally see Ma Ying-jeou as having the advantage, a last-minute, unexpected occurrence -- such as the 2004 election-eve gunshot attack against Chen Shuibian -- could conceivably propel Frank Hsieh ahead, said Zhang.

¶3. (SBU) Zhang commented that Ma's opposition to the Taiwan UN referendum and other "moving-Taiwan-away-from-China actions" would improve the stability of cross-Straits relations if he were elected. He also said that although Beijing preferred Ma due to its proven track record of dialogue with Pan-Blue parties, his strong positions on mainland democratization, removal of mainland missiles, and using the name "Republic of China" would doubtless remain sticking points.

¶4. (SBU) A Hsieh victory would likely see the implementation of the "three links" -- increased tourism opportunities, chartered flights, and removal of limits on Taiwan investment in the mainland -- but would also bring with it Beijing's distrust of the DPP, Zhang said.

How Many will Return to Vote?

¶5. (U) Taiwan Businessmen Associations (TBAs) in south China and throughout the mainland have encouraged their members to return to vote in the election. "For Taiwan, for us, for our children" read the cover of one recent TBA publication calling on members to vote. The pro-Ma publication echoed speeches at several TBA galas held in Dongguan (reftel) during the past year.

¶6. (SBU) Dongguan TBA Executive Vice Chair Charles Hsieh told us March 17 that "many, many" Taiwan investors would return to vote. Media projections on the number of returning voters have ranged from 50,000 to as high as 250,000. However, Xiamen University's Zhang predicted that only a relatively small number of Taishang would return for the vote, mostly due to the cost of travel and a limited number of airline flights.

Tibet Complicates the Issue

17. (SBU) Like other scholars on the mainland, Zhang speculated that the recent riots in Tibet could play to the advantage of the DPP, which he said had already seized upon the slogan, "Tibet today, Taiwan tomorrow." Zhang said that Taiwan voters already apprehensive about communist rule might view the DPP as the best choice to avoid coming under the influence of the mainland.

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